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## How Makers and Preppers Converge in Premodern and Post-Apocalyptic Ruin

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates how US maker culture affirms values of self-reliance and personal responsibility through its increasing convergence with future-oriented preparation in order to construct a US maker identity differentiated from other making cultures worldwide as an ideological project of white American exceptionalism. I argue that the convergence of contemporary making with apocalyptic preparation in the US articulates making practices as vital for individual survival for apocalyptic futures as well as constructs nonwhite and non-Western geographies as simultaneously premodern and post-apocalyptic sites of ruin. US maker culture, while drawing inspiration from these geographies, suggests that such locales will be unaffected by apocalypse and, thus, cannot prepare for it. Consequently, US maker culture excludes the nonwhite inhabitants of these non-Western geographies from the idealized subjecthood rooted in the do-it-yourself (DIY) ideology and preparatory logic that maker culture endorses.

Maker culture and the maker movement broadly characterize early twenty-first-century interests in the skills and values associated with do-it-yourself (DIY) activities, mechanical tinkering, and artisanal craftwork. The popularity of making, hacking, and crafting practices in the US, for instance, manifests in the proliferation of makerspaces and Maker Faires as well as the success of online handicraft marketplaces such as Etsy.com.<sup>1</sup> The practices of making, hacking, and crafting are practiced globally, of course.<sup>2</sup> Although making describes varied present-day efforts worldwide, many international sites of making often construct and differentiate themselves directly in relation to the US. Claudia Costa Pederson, for example, argues that Latin American women artists working with refuse technologies reimagine dominant conceptions of making practices.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Silvia Lindtner examines how contemporary Chinese making activities enable and contest shifts in China's national identity and economy.<sup>4</sup> She highlights, in particular, how Chinese makers negotiate persistent discourses that position China behind the US in terms of modern technological, economic, and cultural development.

While prior scholarship has examined the ways non-US sites of making and craft practices construct and differentiate themselves in relation to the US, this article instead investigates how contemporary US maker culture mobilizes non-Western geographies to distinguish itself within a global context of making. I show how contemporary maker culture constructs a US maker identity as distinct from other making cultures worldwide through the confluence of making practices and future-oriented preparation. I examine the centrality of DIY as an American ideology of craft that negotiates between communal and anti-capitalist values on the one hand and individualist and capitalist values on the other. To do so, I analyze discourses within and overlapping with American maker culture and situate them within histories of the racial politics of craft and DIY movements as anxious responses to modern industrialization in the US. I then explore how the discursive justifications in contemporary US culture for the importance of individual autonomy and responsibility through DIY practices have shifted to incorporate anxieties around disaster, apocalypse, and preparation for future survival. This growing convergence between US maker culture and widespread apocalyptic thinking, a legacy of Cold War

America, reinforces values linking moral well-being with personal responsibility, work ethic, and capitalist participation and success.

I highlight core affinities that discussions of making share with contemporary American popular media concerning survivalism and doomsday preparation through mainstream prepper culture—including magazines, television programs, and survival guides. In so doing, I discuss the rise of prepper and survivalist cultures as responses to contemporary crises in white masculinity, expressed through conservative gender politics, racism and xenophobia, and paramilitary practices. US maker culture, in its increasing incorporation of prepper logics, looks forward toward an impending apocalypse to validate individual self-reliance and personal responsibility expressed through preparation to survive disaster. Central to this convergence of maker and preparatory culture in the US is imagining nonwhite and non-Western geographies as simultaneously premodern and post-apocalyptic sites of survival, ruined locales where the skills of making have always been part of daily life, since the racialized inhabitants are believed to have never undergone modern industrialization. US maker culture, while identifying nonwhite and non-Western geographies as teeming with making, suggests that such locations, in never having become modern but already imagined as post-apocalyptic, will be unaffected by future apocalypse and, thus, cannot prepare for it. Consequently, US maker culture ultimately excludes the nonwhite inhabitants of non-Western geographies from the idealized DIY subjecthood of self-reliant makers rooted in the preparatory logic it endorses.

## Crafting DIY Futures

Contemporary advocacy of making practices, hand-made crafts, and DIY attitudes continue a history of cultural responses bemoaning modern industrialization, often blamed for causing mass consumption, devalued labor, and over-reliance on technology.<sup>5</sup> Discussions since the late eighteenth century have sought to address perceived socioeconomic, environmental, and moral problems attributed to industrialization by advocating returns to handicraft and manual expertise as idealized work.<sup>6</sup> For example, proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which began in late nineteenth-century England before spreading to the US, argued that a return to handicraft would enable socioeconomic reforms needed to mitigate the perceived societal degeneracy blamed on industrialization.<sup>7</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, similar responses to modern industrialization include Peter Korn's suggestion that the reduction of craftwork in a mass-produced world has resulted in widespread yearnings for fulfillment that its return will satisfy.<sup>8</sup> Matthew Crawford, similarly, argues that "the disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit," coordinating the loss of handicraft in US schools with a future of technological ignorance.<sup>9</sup> Within this context, Chris Anderson, former editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, celebrates contemporary makers—and the maker movement—as the driving force for a new industrial revolution, informed by traditions of craft and advances in computing technologies, expected to transcend the pitfalls of conventional industrial production through individual entrepreneurial practices.<sup>10</sup>

Maker culture is centrally informed by midcentury American do-it-yourself (DIY).<sup>11</sup> Use of the term "DIY" to describe individual and private leisure practices of construction, fabrication, and repair, Steve Gelber demonstrates, initially emerged in the early twentieth century before reaching widespread popularity in the US by the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> DIY as a practice of private and individual home maintenance largely for white suburban middle-class men advanced a model of masculinity rooted in traditions of manual labor,

“distinct from the arena of alienation that was the modern workplace.”<sup>13</sup> DIY aligned with key values in Cold War America, including individualism, capitalist enterprise, the significance of the home, and fear of external threats.<sup>14</sup> For example, the US celebration of DIY abroad championed images of the individual ingenuity of the citizens of capitalist America against constructions of the racialized and uniform others engaged in mass industrial manufacture in communist China.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on this history, I use DIY throughout this article to designate an ideology of making and crafting rooted in American individualism that values autonomy, personal responsibility, and capitalist success.<sup>16</sup> I do not characterize all practices identified as making and crafting as rehearsing the logics that American DIY suggests in the imperative to “do it yourself”; rather, I look at the pervasiveness of DIY as an ideology that underpins the justification for making, crafting, and similar practices throughout contemporary US culture as individualistic responses to shifting sociomaterial conditions, often linking together work ethic and moral well-being.

In contrast to midcentury DIY, communal groups throughout US history—including the Oneida Community in the mid-nineteenth century and the counterculture in the 1960s—have also practiced craftwork as part of collective, rather than individualist, living in rejection of modern industrial capitalism and its perceived detrimental effects.<sup>17</sup> This distinction, between individualist and capitalist DIY on the one hand and more communal and anti-capitalist movements on the other, is particularly visible in the transformation of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from England to the US. The American manifestation of the Arts and Crafts Movement departed significantly in ideological commitments from its anti-capitalist English origins, which were influenced primarily by socialist William Morris. As T. J. Jackson Lears demonstrates, US Arts and Crafts leaders held an “implicit acceptance of modern work conditions, combined with their individualist and idealist assumptions.”<sup>18</sup> Participants in the movement were mainly affluent white Americans who turned to Arts and Crafts ideology as an expression of class and racial anxieties, since fear of “proliferating socialists, anarchists, and immigrants energized the craft revival.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, US Arts and Crafts enabled these affluent participants to blame particular classed and racialized subjects within capitalism as what was harming society rather than capitalism itself.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, US Arts and Crafts ideology drew heavily on moral frameworks from Puritan tradition, such as the moral value of hard work, and from perfectionism, which “sustained the delusion that social problems were entirely soluble through individual moral betterment.”<sup>21</sup> US Arts and Crafts ideology, which focused on individualistic work ethic and tacit acceptance of modern capitalism, provided an important foundation for the rise of DIY ideology in the US in the following century.

US maker culture represents a contemporary version of the American individualist ideology of craft that routes through the US Arts and Crafts Movement and midcentury DIY. Like these predecessors, maker culture, rather than seeking to reject it completely, imagines itself as a means to reform the problems of current industrial capitalist production. Contemporary maker culture responds partly to the decline of manufacturing labor in the US resulting from the relocation of domestic manufacturing jobs to cheaper locations such as countries in Asia and Latin America as well as the rise of computing work beginning in the twentieth century. In his 2012 book *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*, for example, Anderson argues that “real countries make stuff,” suggesting a nation’s legitimacy depends on its manufacturing industries.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Anderson constructs a crisis in US manufacturing as congruent with a crisis in US nationhood. To position makers as the potential for a new industrial revolution, Anderson depicts China as a competing manufacturing force that the US must surpass, echoing American constructions of competition between US and Chinese manufacturing industries during

the Cold War. For example, Anderson describes the potential for makers to revolutionize contemporary production through the rise of new technologies that enable “DIY manufacturing,” such as 3D printers, by suggesting that “manufacturing companies in the United States and Europe are increasingly able to compete with low-cost labor in China.”<sup>23</sup> These comments implicitly locate makers, maker culture, and the ingenuity that Anderson associates with them in the US and in Europe, excluding China and other racialized geographies of low-cost labor as part of his imagined maker-led industrial revolution. DIY as an ideology of craft and American individualism also reinforces white American exceptionalism constructed against foreign nations such as China.

Criticisms of industrial production often deploy nostalgia for a fantasy of premodern, preindustrial artisanal life in response to social ills attributed to shifting material and labor arrangements. Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym argues, shapes the direction of the future despite its appearance as backward-looking in its longing for an imagined past.<sup>24</sup> Many of the historic criticisms of modern industrialization, including from maker culture, frame a return to handicraft as necessary to preempt undesirable futures. According to Ben Anderson, preemption, as one kind of logic of intervention, seeks to prevent the arrival of potential futures by eliminating their anticipated causes in the present.<sup>25</sup> The Arts and Crafts Movement, the US counterculture, and much of contemporary US maker culture, for example, have characterized the skills of handicraft as the necessary means for avoiding continued social degeneracy, rampant consumerism, and an innovation-starved citizenry respectively. They suggest that these future consequences result from increasing industrial production, defamiliarization with material labor, and overreliance on computing technologies, which must be avoided through increasing crafting activities at large. Regarding contemporary US making, for instance, Chris Anderson suggests the need to preempt the continued decline and devaluing of industrial manufacturing in the US: “we have to reverse that path—not by returning to the giant factories of old, with their armies of employees, but by creating a new kind of manufacturing economy” that can defeat China’s.<sup>26</sup> Rather than return to a previous past through nostalgia for handicraft, however, Anderson mobilizes nostalgia for handicraft to imagine a new future through collective participation in making in order to reverse China’s industrial dominance.

While making is imagined as the collective engine for a US-based industrial revolution that preempts increasing industrial domination by China, it is also imagined as individual preparation. In addition to preemption, Ben Anderson notes that preparation offers another kind of anticipatory logic, one that braces for an undesirable future and acts to mitigate its expected consequences rather than attempting to circumvent its arrival.<sup>27</sup> In asserting why adults must train children in making skills, for example, maker culture figurehead Tim O’Reilly writes, “One of the best pieces of advice I ever received when my kids were young was this: ‘Your job as a parent is to prepare your children for their future.’ For their future, not the one that you grew into—that’s their past.”<sup>28</sup> O’Reilly further explains that the unknown details of the future should direct parents to raise their children to acquire making practices, framed as versatile expertise for diverse future conditions. For makers, making describes practices that not only can preempt futures but are necessary practices that prepare for unknown futures.

This incorporation of preparatory logic also reveals contemporary making’s operation as both a collective project for intervening in the arrival of undesirable futures and also as an individual project for self-preservation, negotiating both the collectivist trajectories in the history of craft as well as the individualist manifestations aligned with DIY ideology. The column titled “MakeShift” in the maker culture magazine *Make* (2005–present), for instance, places readers into various emergency, survival, and apocalyptic scenarios to underscore the broad utility of making: building a water filter, surviving a zombie

infestation, and weathering through nuclear winter.<sup>29</sup> These disaster scenarios challenge readers to propose solutions for how to respond based on materials at hand. In one particular scenario, readers are tasked with evacuating their wife and children after an earthquake sets off impending rock slides and floods toward their mountain home. A moral dilemma inserted into the scenario involves whether to save “your only neighbor, a single guy named Dave, [who] probably partied hard last night and slept through the quake. But his house will flood just as quickly as yours. [ . . . ] In a disaster like this, [is it] every man for himself?”<sup>30</sup> The scenario constructs whether to aid this irresponsible neighbor—depicted as unprepared and a burden—as a question of personal responsibility and self-preservation in the face of disaster; tenuous ties to others interfere with protecting one’s own self and family. Making under DIY ideology is imagined only to secure one’s own survival in the face of future catastrophe when collective welfare is in question.

## Makers and Preppers

Arguments advocating making skills as preparation for surviving disasters highlight both the preparatory logics that lurk among contemporary maker culture and its increasing convergence with US prepper culture through shared commitments to self-reliance and individual responsibility to do it yourself. Prepper culture, Casey Ryan Kelly shows, operates primarily through performances of masculinity rooted in physicality, manual and mechanical labor, weapons training, and other paramilitary practices.<sup>31</sup> Previously viewed as extremist activities, private planning, training, and hoarding for disaster and doomsday scenarios have become mainstream entertainment in the US, what Gwendolyn Audrey Foster characterizes as “apocotainment.”<sup>32</sup> From the commercial sale of survival guides and the popularity of reality shows such as *Doomsday Preppers* (2012–2014) to the popular *Fallout* video game franchise (1997–2018), contemporary US culture is fascinated by the world ending.

The intersection of maker culture and prepper culture joins nostalgia for craft as responses to changing socioeconomic conditions with Cold War ideology. Foster explicitly traces contemporary prepper culture back to the “paranoia and lack of empathy” central to the Cold War.<sup>33</sup> The logics informing Cold War preparation practices—such as safety drills and supply hoarding in the face of potential Soviet threats of nuclear destruction—persist in contemporary US anticipatory politics.<sup>34</sup> Joseph Masco, for instance, demonstrates that the current US counterterror state invested in domestic security inherits the logics of Cold War fear and response.<sup>35</sup>

Anxieties about the threat of foreigners undergirded domestic Cold War culture. Michael Curtin, for example, examines the rise of television documentaries during the midcentury that featured Cold War tensions between Western capitalist countries and their Eastern communist enemies. Such television programming constructed “the otherness of Communist societies [as] so profound that the programs are pessimistic regarding possibilities for accommodation between East and West,” racializing communist nations like China as wholly alien and threatening.<sup>36</sup> While watching these documentaries in their homes, US citizens were also charged to build, though rarely executed, home fallout shelters, which were part of “an ideologically charged national do-it-yourself project that permeated America’s post-war consciousness.”<sup>37</sup> Defense from foreign enemies became a DIY project, since “citizens were responsible for their own safety. Americans adopted a framework for security based on self-defense bolstered by private enterprise, rather than on cooperative democratic efforts to ease international and domestic tensions.”<sup>38</sup>

Alongside Cold War expectations of individualistic preparation and defense against foreign threats, the perception of white masculinity as under attack also shapes the

emergence of contemporary prepper culture. Contemporary white male supremacy frames attacks on white masculinity as also attacks on the US itself, conceived as a nation of and for white men, since, as Sally Robinson suggests, “an enduring image of the disenfranchised white man has become a symbol for the decline of the American way.”<sup>39</sup> Such challenges to the dominance of normative white men since the midcentury include advancements in civil rights, women’s rights, and queer rights resulting in an increasingly multicultural America; the establishment of affirmative action; immigration from Central America and Asia; and the relocation and outsourcing of jobs from the US to other nations.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the rise of contemporary paramilitary culture emerged to reestablish claims to masculinity perceived as lost through the nation’s defeat to racialized communist enemies in the Vietnam War.<sup>41</sup> The centrality of violence and weaponry to prepper culture rehearses this fantasy of masculinity offered by paramilitary practices, since, following James William Gibson, “American men—lacking confidence in the government and the economy, troubled by the changing relations between the sexes, uncertain of their identity or their future—began to *dream*, to fantasize about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world. And the hero of all these dreams was the paramilitary warrior.”<sup>42</sup> This fantasy of reclaimed masculinity, however, relies on war metaphors that position white men as defending themselves, their families, and the nation from often racialized and foreign threats, both internal and external.

This fantasy of defending white masculinity under attack includes belief that “the whole modern world was damned as unacceptable.”<sup>43</sup> Such a view suggests the desire for the modern world’s destruction, which situates paramilitary culture and prepper culture both within contemporary survivalism, an ideology framing contemporary daily life as precarious and hostile. Philip Lamy describes survivalism as “not interested in reforming the system; the collapse is imminent. However, it does offer a plan of action, a kind of ‘redemption’ or ‘salvation,’ in the manner of surviving the great destruction of the current order and the living on to build a new one.”<sup>44</sup> Survivalism is particularly prevalent in right-wing and conservative groups that view white and normatively heterosexual masculinity as under attack by the world at large. Survivalism as a form of millenarian thinking anticipates the collapse of the current world order with aspirations to start anew. As Lamy continues, “survivalism becomes part of salvation, which, in the early months or years of the Apocalypse, means disaster preparation.”<sup>45</sup> To be able to reap the benefits of the apocalypse, the disintegration of the unacceptable world that has challenged the authority of white masculinity, one must prepare to survive the apocalypse.

A significant body of scholarship has examined apocalyptic and catastrophic narratives.<sup>46</sup> Foster, for example, characterizes the US as an “apocalyptic obsessed culture,” while James Berger identifies “a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture.”<sup>47</sup> While analysis of contemporary US culture and its obsession with future destruction ranges in the use of the terms “apocalypse” and “post-apocalypse,” the prevalence of preparatory logics across American culture and the popularity of apocatainment demonstrate a widespread interest in future calamity. For my purposes, apocalyptic thought describes concern with causes of the catastrophic end, ways to preempt it, and moral judgments made upon those who fare through it. In his study of narrative finality, for instance, Frank Kermode argues that apocalypses function to frame history, particularly through revelations, which links conceptions of catastrophe with earlier religious literatures.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, apocalypse, Elizabeth K. Rosen suggests, enacts social critique by identifying responsibility for the end and for evaluating how different subjects will weather, successfully or not, through calamity.<sup>49</sup> Many of the craft movements responding to modern industrialization, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and US counterculture, for example, were driven by apocalyptic thought in



attempting to preempt undesirable futures. By practicing craft to preempt the dystopian future ahead, such responses frame undesirable futures as punishment for social failings attributed to industrialization.

In contrast to apocalypse's focus on the final disaster, I conceptualize post-apocalyptic thought as concerned with the quotidian details of the aftermath, representing a shift toward how the conditions of apocalypse become everyday.<sup>50</sup> Stephen Joyce, for instance, contends that post-apocalypse only becomes legible to a broad audience following World War II, when nuclear destruction becomes widely feared alongside the recognition of the possibility of living in the world destroyed by catastrophe.<sup>51</sup> Berger argues that in spite of the end of the world, "something is left over, and that world after the world, the *post-apocalypse*, is usually the true object of the apocalyptic writer's concern."<sup>52</sup> Contemporary prepper culture, for instance, envisions future catastrophe as the imminent corrective that will identify and reward self-reliant individuals fit to continue to live in its wake.

Whereas the culture of Cold War preparation approached surviving the apocalypse with dread, contemporary survivalism, including prepper culture, anticipates the apocalypse with optimism for moral validation of its preparatory lifestyle. For prepper culture, apocalypse provides the moral litmus test for validating self-reliance, since the apocalypse does not rapture the chosen away but is instead expected to cleanse the world of the unworthy like that imagined through the Great Deluge. A central principle of the American Preppers Network, for instance, contends that "prepper families who learn to live independently will find themselves prospering greatly—in ways that may not be apparent to the enslaved masses of society."<sup>53</sup> While post-apocalypse typically concerns the excluded and remaindered, this statement from the American Preppers Network constructs the prepper community as the included and chosen through apocalyptic thought—the responsibly self-reliant special elect in contrast to the "enslaved masses" who will succumb to disaster. Rather than working to preempt the future collectively, one is responsible for preparing oneself for its arrival, to "do it yourself" to avoid apocalyptic punishment.

In addition to imagining global apocalypse, preppers also frame personal-scale events as sites of potential disaster to render survival preparation as a moral and individual responsibility of daily life.<sup>54</sup> Attempting to dispel perceptions that preppers are simply doomsday fanatics, for example, the American Preppers Network declares, "We firmly believe that every American family should strive to become Self-Reliant, enabling them to better weather the day-to-day disasters, catastrophes and hardships that we all experience."<sup>55</sup> In describing catastrophe to include "the death of an immediate family member, an all consuming [sic] house fire, debilitating sickness or injury or a sudden devastating financial change such as losing a job," the American Preppers Network constructs apocalypse as, ultimately, any test of self-reliance, demanding preparation as a core responsibility of daily living.<sup>56</sup>

This conception of catastrophe as inherently everyday suggests a model of post-apocalyptic thinking that exchanges the grand catastrophe ahead for crises constitutive of everyday life. Frederick Buell shows how a similar domestication of catastrophe has transformed US environmental crisis discourse in recent decades. He asserts that "no longer an apocalypse ahead, critical environmental problems and constraints help construct society's sense of daily normality."<sup>57</sup> Buell describes this form of post-apocalyptic thought, living amid ubiquitous disaster, as a form of slow apocalypse.<sup>58</sup> Under survivalism, which has framed the world that challenges the dominance of white male supremacy as both unacceptable and on the brink of collapse, US prepper culture

advocates the importance of individual preparation as a moral responsibility by treating daily life as inherently catastrophic.

## Educating Prepared Subjects

US apocotainment and the American Preppers Network website represent examples of disaster preparedness pedagogies, what John Preston describes as materials and practices influencing how individuals respond to prospective disaster.<sup>59</sup> Disaster preparedness pedagogies come in a range of media—including television broadcasts, magazine articles, and survival guides—outlining conditions of disaster, subjects at risk, and prescriptions for preparation. Additionally, the exercises, scenarios, and drills that participants undergo to practice for potential futures also serve as disaster preparedness pedagogies. Much of the scholarship on contemporary anticipatory action centers on government processes, programs, and efforts that educate residents to respond to crisis in state-sanctioned ways.<sup>60</sup> For Preston, these constitute official preparedness pedagogies, which originate from government authorities.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, folk preparedness pedagogies derive from non-state agents who prescribe best practices for emergencies.

US prepper culture, with its distrust of governmental authority, relies primarily on sources of folk preparedness pedagogies.<sup>62</sup> Because individual responsibility for survival is a central value of many US preparatory cultures, disaster preparedness pedagogies commonly reinforce DIY attitudes toward preparation.<sup>63</sup> These resources constitute construction kit preparedness pedagogies, which “[are] to be interpreted and acted on by the individual in the event of a crisis [. . .] to aid citizens in constructing their own shelters and equipment for survival.”<sup>64</sup> Construction kit preparedness pedagogies, in their DIY sensibilities, require that practitioners possess competencies needed to follow and deviate from instructions as necessary themselves.

Disaster preparedness pedagogies, beyond communicating skills or strategies to practitioners, frame how to perceive threats to one’s security. Consequently, disaster preparedness pedagogies within contemporary US survivalist and prepper cultures reinforce disaster preparedness as individual responsibilities for one’s self and one’s family, paranoia regarding competition among other preppers and hostile outsiders, and ideologies of white male supremacy. The proliferation of zombie-themed media, for instance—as represented by the massive popularity of the *The Walking Dead* cross-media franchise that includes comics, television, and video games (2003–present)—rehearse ways of seeing racialized, historically black, subjects figured through the zombie as threatening the survival of imperiled whiteness.<sup>65</sup> As Steven Pokornowski suggests, the pervasiveness of zombie media depicts and justifies violence against racialized bodies through discourses of self-defense within the context of contemporary US racial tensions and state-sanctioned police violence.<sup>66</sup>

The reality television program *Doomsday Preppers* performs similar pedagogical work not only by discussing principles of prepping but also by normalizing prepper subjectivities. Beginning in the second season, the show’s prepping consultancy, the company Practical Preppers, provides grades for each featured prepper, or set of preppers, and their preparations for their respective vision of civilization’s end, whether the result of climate change, economic collapse, or geomagnetic reversal. The grading of preppers, the justification of grades, and the recommendations offered to improve preparations function pedagogically as the show outlines standardized principles for preparedness. Congruent with the DIY framework of construction kit preparedness pedagogies, *Doomsday Preppers* provides rationale for specific actions in preparation, for both general and particular disasters. By watching the show, viewers acquire guidelines,



instructions, and attitudes that encourage them to become preppers themselves, adapting what they learn from the show to their own concerns regarding future calamity.

In addition, the grading of preppers on the show treats prepping as a legitimate activity and reinforces the framing of preppers as ordinary people, which enables viewers of *Doomsday Preppers* to identify more readily with those who participate in historically fringe practices.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the construction of white heterosexual masculinity presented throughout *Doomsday Preppers*, Kelly argues that “what is novel about this current iteration of apocalyptic manhood is that it has been translated into a form of entertainment media that is constructed to communicate authenticity.”<sup>68</sup> As participants on a reality show, these profiled preppers possess what Laura Grindstaff describes as ordinary celebrity, “the incorporation of ordinary people into the celebrity framework” that foregrounds constructions of their relatability.<sup>69</sup> This framing of authenticity and ordinariness affords substitution through identification by viewers with those featured on reality television, which encourages viewers to inhabit the subject position of the preppers depicted. *Doomsday Preppers* as folk disaster preparedness pedagogy validates not only prepping practices but also prepping subjectivities.

A similar pedagogical function operates through survival-oriented reality shows, such as *Survivor* (US series, 2000–present).<sup>70</sup> While not explicitly post-apocalyptic in premise, *Survivor* and similar shows offer survival skills as entertainment, gesturing toward the survivalists who prepare for future catastrophe. *Survivor* is a competitive reality show where participants must withstand the difficulties of living in a remote location without being provided food and shelter while also navigating the cutthroat politics involved with voting competitors off until only one remains victorious. *Survivor* and other survival-oriented reality television in the US, such as *Naked and Afraid* (2013–present), explore the self-reliant capacities of US subjects for surviving without modern conveniences. Moreover, such shows dramatize tensions between selves and others, whether a dozen fellow castaways in *Survivor* or one’s single partner in *Naked and Afraid*. Consequently, *Survivor* and other survival-oriented reality television programs simulate and reinforce for participants and viewers a world demanding individual self-preservation—to do it yourself—to overcome successfully environmental precarity as well as burdensome, and likely untrustworthy, social ties.

Reality television shows such as *Survivor* and *Naked and Afraid*, which rely on identification fostered by ordinary celebrity, function as a kind of exercise in survival skills for viewers. In examining Cold War preparation, Tracy C. Davis explores how exercises as “trials of skills by those learning the ropes” are rooted in the theatrical tradition of rehearsals.<sup>71</sup> Because the participants of such shows possess ordinary celebrity, viewers are encouraged to not only learn from the participants’ actions but also to speculate on their own strategies were they to be in similar situations themselves as a vicarious exercise or speculative rehearsal—either on a future season or in an apocalyptic future. *Doomsday Preppers*, *Survivor*, and other popular apocotainment media make disaster preparedness mainstream by serving as folk disaster preparedness pedagogies for individual viewers to rehearse and prepare for catastrophic futures themselves, while emphasizing competition, individual responsibility, and extreme distrust of others.

## Ruining Time and Space

Disaster preparedness pedagogies enable viewers, participants, and consumers to make the future present by allowing them to construct an unrealized future and act in advance of its arrival. Whether calculating the future through statistical predictions, imagining the future through narrative representations, or performing the future through role-playing exercises, the future can be made present in many ways.<sup>72</sup> The reality television show *The*

*Colony* (2009–2010), for example, presents a post-apocalyptic future to document how groups of US participants in each of its two seasons fare in exercises set during fictional global epidemics. Faced with limited resources and other challenges imposed by the show, the participants of *The Colony* rehearse survival in staged urban settings as tests of preparation for post-apocalyptic life.

The geographies represented in these post-apocalyptic futures show that disaster preparedness pedagogies shape not only how to see and prepare for disasters but also how time and space are imagined unevenly through the identification of past disasters, their ramifications, and future disaster potentials. For instance, the two seasons of *The Colony* were filmed at the edges of downtown Los Angeles and outside of New Orleans, as settings to explore how US life might endure after apocalypse. The first season of *The Colony* echoed twentieth- and twenty-first-century fascination with imagining Los Angeles as the epicenter of apocalyptic ruin, while the latter season drew on perceptions of New Orleans as a large-scale failure of preparation and response, particularly governmental, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.<sup>73</sup>

The US cultural imaginary conceives both Los Angeles and New Orleans as modern urban ruins, present-day sites of Western civilization's decay. This allows them to function as ready-made geographies for rehearsing the post-apocalypse. As Ann Laura Stoler notes, "*Ruin* is both the claim about the state of a thing and a process affecting it."<sup>74</sup> To conceive of Los Angeles and New Orleans as ruins, as wreckage, requires conceiving of them as ruined, subjected to processes that have wrecked them—whether by natural disaster, military force, or neglect of care. Stoler elaborates that "ruins are made, but not just by anyone, anytime, anywhere."<sup>75</sup> Certain things, geographies, and bodies are viewable as ruins; they not only have undergone processes that ruined them but also processes that allow specific subjects to perceive them as ruined.<sup>76</sup> For Los Angeles, New Orleans, and other large American cities imagined as sites of disaster and destruction, their perception as already in decline, as presently potentially post-apocalyptic, results from the history of white flight beginning in the mid-twentieth century, as white middle-class families—motivated partly by racist and xenophobic anxieties—relocated from urban centers to suburban communities, drawing away economic and political resources along with them.<sup>77</sup>

Disaster preparedness pedagogies construct conceptions of time, such as past, present, and future, unevenly across space through their conceptions of catastrophe and ruin. *The Colony* presents one framework for viewing ruin in its rehearsal of post-apocalyptic life through urban environments steeped in the cultural imagination of disaster by marking the contemporary geographies of Los Angeles and New Orleans as previews of post-apocalyptic futures to come. Following Christopher Dole et al., such constructions of catastrophe often articulate contours for defining modernity.<sup>78</sup> Los Angeles and New Orleans, subsequently, operate as anachronistic spaces to make the post-apocalyptic future present, ruins of modernity contemporaneous with modernity itself.

Shows like *Survivor*, in contrast, suggest an alternate form of anachronistic ruin found within contemporary preparatory cultures. As Jennifer Bowering Delisle argues, *Survivor* constructs its geographic settings as left behind or outside the temporal rhythms of modern development.<sup>79</sup> Delisle quotes promotional material from the fourth season of *Survivor*, for example, which describes that participants must "relearn the most basic skills: how to find and prepare food, how to build shelter, and how to maintain their health under difficult circumstances" by themselves.<sup>80</sup> As Delisle comments, this description implies that the participants "must relearn these skills not because they knew them earlier in life, but because humankind knew them at an earlier point in history."<sup>81</sup> To task *Survivor* contestants with needing to "relearn the most basic skills" underscores how the

show's participants stand in for the rest of the US, and modernity, and suggests that their ability to survive reflects the capacity for modern US subjects who have collectively "forgotten" these skills to survive on their own.

This interest in contemporary US subjects "relearning" what are characterized as basic, primitive, or premodern survival skills reinforces existing hierarchies of modern development that position Western nations, largely denoting white European and North American countries, as superior geographies to those imagined as part of the Global South, such as countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>82</sup> *Survivor* and similar shows suggest that remembering what are considered fundamental and historic skills requires spaces available in the present that are seen as anachronistic settings from the past. These shows largely frame the locales of their staged survival exercises in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Latin America as primitive, exotic, and undeveloped settings compared to the modern Western geographies from where the participants hail. In the US *Survivor*'s production history, for instance, none of its first thirty-seven seasons, up through the fall of 2018, were filmed in locations in Europe or north of Latin America. Such imagination of nonwhite, non-Western geographies as premodern and, thus, suggested to be inferior to modern white European and North American countries draws on histories of colonial domination and exploitation as well as scientific racism predicated on constructions of race and racial hierarchy.<sup>83</sup>

Consequently, US prepper and maker cultures view racialized geographies unlike the white West as temporally anomalous, anachronistic spaces lingering or intruding into the modern present. *Make* magazine's column "Heirloom Technology," for example, looks largely to various nonwhite and non-Western cultures to "[find] the technology of the future from the forgotten ideas of the past."<sup>84</sup> While some articles discuss figures and technologies associated with modernity, including the Wright Brothers and audio headphones, "Heirloom Technology" articles consistently fetishize constructions of ancient wisdom attributed to non-Western geographies such as Kenya, Guatemala, and Indonesia. Like the premise of *Survivor*, the column's title of "Heirloom Technology" invokes construction of premodern knowledges that require recovering—knowledges believed to be forgotten or ignored by Western modernity but require remembering and relearning—through exposure to these premodern spaces. This emphasis on age, contrasted with associating modernity with newness, for instance, is particularly pronounced in a feature on irrigation techniques from the "ancient Aztecs" as well as another on boat design in contemporary China, which is described as "the oldest civilization."<sup>85</sup>

Contemporary US preparatory cultures, including maker culture, largely frame modernity as an undesired period of social and technological dependence against a premodern history of idealized self-reliance. Despite the wide range of theorizations of the sociomaterial conditions that modernity comes to signify, modernity as a concept organizes time and space in particular ways.<sup>86</sup> Across modernity's many theorizations, as Walter Benjamin asserts, common narratives that describe it as a fissure from premodernity rely on linear models of time.<sup>87</sup> Drawing on Benjamin, Shannon Lee Dawdy emphasizes that modernity operates as an ideology of time and history, which treats the conditions of modernity, however defined, as congruent with the normative present historic period of the entire world.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, US preparatory cultures construct anachronistic geographies as locales that are seen as demanding self-reliance and autonomy either because the locale has fallen behind modernity, as with nonwhite, non-Western geographies seen as premodern, or because the place has encountered modernity's failures prematurely, as with urban centers following white flight viewed as post-apocalyptic.

*Survivor* and similar programming conflate geographies imagined as premodern with geographies imagined as post-apocalyptic. This equivalence constructs DIY attitudes and knowledges as individual responsibilities for survival in contrast to the widespread dependence that modernity is believed to foster. For survivalists preparing for future apocalypse, such geographies become sites for making the future present, framing geographies simultaneously as premodern past and post-apocalyptic future. By “relearning” the skills necessary to survive in the post-apocalypse in contemporary locales such as Guatemala, Kenya, and Samoa, which the show constructs as premodern, *Survivor* as disaster preparedness pedagogy renders premodernity and post-apocalypse as functionally equivalent.

These non-Western geographies and their nonwhite inhabitants are already ruined by their exclusion from what is considered modernity in order to be made present as post-apocalyptic ruins. Because non-Western geographies are constructed as both premodern past and post-apocalyptic future, contemporary US preppers also treat these locales as resources for preparatory insights and appropriation. For instance, in a 2013 themed issue of *Lucky Peach* magazine (2011–2017), the US food publication featured the apocalypse as the inspiration to underscore cooking as both a craft and a fundamental survival skill.<sup>89</sup> Joining articles on foraging, pickling, and canning, a contribution by Kris Yembamroong finds inspiration in contemporary Thailand for post-apocalyptic preparation.<sup>90</sup> Yembamroong writes, “Much of Thailand already cooks from something akin to an apocalyptic pantry,” echoing other preparatory constructions of non-Western geographies as anachronistically post-apocalyptic in their perceived premodern state.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, Yembamroong’s comment suggests that future disaster may have little effect on daily life in Thailand, since it is already imagined to be surviving daily conditions similar to the apocalypse.

Though this prepper model of history bemoans the social and technological dependence associated with industrial modernization, it also requires such a construction of dependency in order to exalt DIY preparatory practices in the face of modernity’s potential collapse. Preppers optimistically anticipate the arrival of apocalypse to cleanse those they see as morally irresponsible from the world and validate their own capacities to fulfill individual responsibilities of survival.<sup>92</sup> For prepper culture’s normative moral order, prepping is constructed as a personal choice within geographies that are seen as modern and developed but not yet ruined, where preparation becomes necessary and legible as individual responsibility for surviving future calamity.

Prepper culture suggest that ruins are geographies that demand autonomy, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. But ruins, as Lewis Gordon notes, are “the remains of a human project that [has] ceased.”<sup>93</sup> With respect to constructions of premodern ruins, US prepper culture suggests that contemporary Thailand, Guatemala, and China have ceased in the human project of modernity. As anachronistic geographies, they are also temporally stagnant locales. The nonwhite inhabitants of these non-Western geographies do not receive the same moral recognition as responsibly prepared or prepped individuals in the US, even if they are celebrated for their fluency in making and craft, since prepping and its corresponding moral validation require future-thinking and impending apocalypse. For preppers, apocalypse will judge favorably those who have “forgotten” but “relearned” fundamental survival skills in preparation for its arrival while punishing modern subjects who do not. Consequently, the inhabitants of non-Western geographies are not seen as prepping as they are already imagined to be in the midst of immediate survival; they would be unaffected by modernity’s collapse having not experienced modernity themselves. Within the white American prepper moral order, non-Western geographies both have no past, as they are seen as the past, and also have no future toward which to

prepare, as they have always been functionally post-apocalyptic through exclusion from Western constructions of modern development.

## Conclusion

The sectors of contemporary US maker culture converging with survivalism and doomsday prepping argue that the skills of making and crafting are necessary today for preparing for future apocalypse. Under DIY's moral logics, subjects are individually responsible for acquiring making skills to survive in the present and in the future. Consequently, the apocalypse as a future demanding self-sufficiency and autonomy frames the acquisition of the skills imagined to be necessary as a moral responsibility now for one's own well-being.

While makers in geographies such as China, Guatemala, and Kenya may see making practices as opportunities to fashion themselves—individually and collectively—in similarity to and in distinction from the US, the convergence of maker discourses with prepper and survivalist discourses in the US frames such geographies, in their nonwhite and non-Western construction, as already ruined to make premodernity and post-apocalypse present in them. The broad range of popular preparatory and apocalyptic media that functions as disaster preparedness pedagogies in the US—from *Doomsday Preppers* to the American Preppers Network website—teaches participants, viewers, and consumers to see time and space through frameworks of potential disasters. Through efforts to make the post-apocalypse present in what are framed as premodern geographies outside the West, these disaster preparedness pedagogies construct the nonwhite geographies of Latin America, Asia, and Africa as anachronistic spaces in modernity that require autonomy and individual responsibility, enabling them to serve as testbeds and resources for preppers and survivalists.


















Viewing China, for instance, as both nostalgically premodern and anticipatorily ruined, however, suggests an expectation that China will not be affected by the apocalypse for which makers and preppers are preparing. Apocalypse is constructed only as a test for modern space and time, for white Europe and North America, because non-Western geographies are conceived as premodern environments that are already surviving post-apocalyptic conditions. Moreover, as China and other nonwhite and non-Western geographies are imagined to be excluded from the judgments of apocalypse, their inhabitants, too, are excluded from recognition as ideal preparatory and DIY subjects, since they are constructed as incapable of prepping. To take seriously making as a contemporary worldwide phenomenon, we must both attend to its many localized and varied manifestations globally as well as ruin how white US maker culture—as it functions as the ideological center of much of the global imagination of making and increasingly converges with prepper discourses and subsequent racist and xenophobic politics—operationalizes, commodifies, and excludes such geographies.

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